



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

## The scent of the motherland

'In Sensorium: Notes for My People' by Tanaïs (Harper, 2022)

**Tanaïs inundates their memoir with wordplay as well as sound play, inventing their own defiant vocabulary that bends the rules of grammar and linguistics. The reader might have encountered in their grammar books that the pronoun 'tara' in cholito bhasha comes from its shadhu form 'tahara'. Breaking these moulds, the author declares, "The word 'they' is tara, the word for star", encouraging one to take a pause and consider these homographs in a new light.**

QAZI MUSTABEEN NOOR

Discovering Tanaïs was an occasion of queer joy—here they are, an openly nonbinary author making Bangladesh proud. When I had finally received the book in the mail, *In Sensorium: Notes for My People* (Harper, 2022) was already the talk of many towns. The Kirkus Prize win has firmly established them as a force to be reckoned with. Tanaïs, a self-taught perfumer and author, now holds a literary award that has graced authors such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Rebecca Solnit in previous years.

I knew that I had to get both the memoir and the accompanying perfume, 'Pilgrimage', for a fully immersive experience of *In Sensorium*. The perfume is an instant compliment getter; the familiar spicy notes from one's mother's whole spices jar hits the senses first, then a host of attar-like earthy florals ease one into some rather unfamiliar scents. The base notes may surprise you—mitti attar, pyre ash, saltwater accord, among others. Like the perfume, the book too is divided into Base, Heart, and Head ("Notes"); they are both written as well as olfactory notes for those the author calls "my people"—Bengali women and femme folk, or those who feel a sense of solidarity with the marginalised of the world.

"Ancient perfumes exist as fragments in texts, but what if we ourselves don't appear in texts? The dominant culture version of our histories become the Record of Power, where lies, misinterpretations, and erasures abound. I call these the patramyth—foundational lies and mythologies recorded in history to protect the powerful. There are multiple etymologies in the word patramyth, which shares the Greek root patria, or lineage, with patriarchy; patria is a written document in Sanskrit, a language wielded by the powerful in India for a couple of thousand years. Myth is an origin story, but in my mother tongue, Bengali, mithya is a lie."

Tanaïs inundates their memoir with wordplay as well as sound play, inventing their

own defiant vocabulary that bends the rules of grammar and linguistics. The reader might have encountered in their grammar books that the pronoun 'tara' in cholito bhasha comes from its shadhu form 'tahara'. For some of us, years of formal schooling have cemented this etymology in our heads, rendering us unable to find an alternate reality. Breaking these moulds, the author declares, "The word 'they' is tara, the word for star", encouraging one to take a pause and consider these homographs in a new light.

*In Sensorium* then, is an invitation to the scholar, the critic and the pedantic to question their hegemonic forms of thinking and knowing. In Tanaïs' words these are patramyths—a neologism for the hegemonic grand narrative that leaves out marginalised voices and perspectives.

Reading this memoir has brought me face to face with a familiar discomfort—the question of authenticity or inauthenticity in diasporic narratives. *In Sensorium* is well researched, no doubt, yet a lot will seem factually incorrect to the Bangladeshi in Bangladesh. From where does Tanaïs eke out the history of the Boat Girls (the author literally translates this as 'nouka meye', which seems out of place in the Sylhet region)? Was there really a conspiracy to write Bangla in the Arabic script in 1952? Did the Pakistani military atrocities reach the villages of Bengal as early as the night of 25th March, 1971?

When these doubts plague us, we must remember that only figures, numbers, and statistics are found in the archive. Memories are fluid, experiences have more dimensions than mere facts. My experience of reading *In Sensorium* was hence, an exercise in leaving personal biases and preconceived notions at the door. After all, the memoir looks at the 1947 Partition, the Language Movement and the Liberation War directly in the eye. It also challenges the Indian hegemony in the South Asian diasporas of the world, questioning the

silence around Bangladesh and the genocide of 1971.

Tanaïs bravely challenges the erasure of Bengali Muslim identity from the patramyth of Indian hegemony both within South Asia and in the diaspora. The author's interaction with a woman from West Bengal is poignant, rife with the feelings of dismissal and being forced to yield to the dominant culture's ways. This experience of being marginalised as Muslim is valid in Tanaïs' position of a second generation Bangladeshi-American, yet the book often glosses over the predicament of non-Muslim and non-Bengali minorities in Bangladesh.

Such a narrative runs the risk of positioning itself on the slippery slope between victimhood and the celebration of one's differences. The book still does the important work of questioning the literary and cultural canon; it wonders out loud whether Rabindranath considered the Muslim side of the story on the eve of the Partition of Bengal. The Rebel Poet emerges victorious in the age-old Rabindra versus Nazrul debate, yet Nazrul is already canonical.

The memoir is deeply personal and yet heavily historical. Tanaïs does not shy away from highly sensual and sexualised personal history; an ex lover of presumably high caste Indian descent is addressed in many chapters. Family history too has a powerful hold on the memoir as the author's parents reminisce the turbulent days of the Liberation War. Tanaïs has their own memories of growing up brown, Muslim, and queer in a white majority American society.

While the brown girl's coming of age narrative is having its moment in popular literature and culture, *In Sensorium* enters the conversation with its unique and fragrant vignettes of personal and national history intersecting at many points.

Qazi Mustabeen Noor is a PhD student at Queen's University, Canada.

INTERVIEW

## An encounter with Sandeep Ray

USRAAT FAHMIDAH

On a fine Monday morning, Sandeep joined me virtually on Zoom all the way from Malaysia to talk about his novel, *A Flutter in the Colony* (Penguin Random House, 2022).

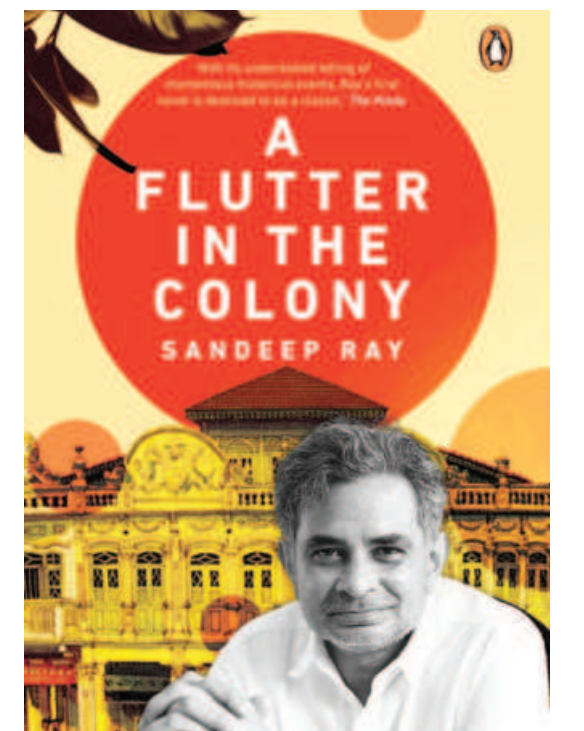
Sandeep Ray, an established filmmaker and historian, made his debut as an author with this thrilling historical fiction that transports us to pre-partition Bengal and the Malaya of the 50s. Currently in Malaysia, he is in the process of settling down to teach as a professor there. Before I could get started with the interview, the author surprisingly had a question for me.

**"How did a copy of this book reach Dhaka?"**  
I said that his book, which vividly brings pre-partition era Kolkata to life, interested me a great deal as a Bengali. I was surprised that more Bangladeshi readers hadn't picked it up yet, I told him, so I was just trying to get more Bangladeshis to read it.

And with that we began our conversation.  
**Tell us about the book and the world you've created.**

**SR:** This book takes place in 1940s Bengal—and when I say Bengal, I mean the undivided Bengal—and also during the 1950s Malaya, not Malaysia, which is what the country came to be known as eventually.

The protagonist goes through all the trauma that South Asians are very familiar with, associated



with independence, Partition, and events that are beyond his control. Regardless, he gets a job as a clerk at a plantation in Malaya. But his past of being an activist of the Freedom movement catches up to him. Because he sees similarities in the new society he has come to, and he struggles to separate his professional and personal life from the political life even though it's not his own country. He has regrets about what happened in India in the 1940s.

**You've talked in interviews about how your earlier experiences shaped this book. Tell about your inspiration behind this book.**

**SR:** I grew this interest later in life when I realised that my father, in 1951, had come from Kolkata to a country that was not yet independent. During the 1950s, it must have been very different and strange. So, he told me a lot of stories about his life there. And then in the 1980s, a lot of the Southeast Asian economies exploded and became massive. Everything changed after that.

Malaya was not independent. There was a struggle put up by communists. In South Asia, we are used to having communist factions in our political parties within a scope of discussion of politics. But in this part of the world—in Malaya and Singapore—at that time and definitely now, it's really looked upon as a terrible thing. People are nervous even talking about it.

But of course, history is much more complex. I'm not advocating for change of systems or anything like that; I'm saying it's been seven decades now. Why not talk about it with some sincerity? Why not get a realistic view of what the 1950s were like? What did the communists want? Where did they succeed and where did they fail? I think we should revisit that past. That was part of the inspiration for the book—the Malaysia section of the book.

The India part comes from our family. My grandfather's father came over from Bangladesh. Our ancestral home was in a place that's still there, called Sreepur. He had built a school there in 1916 after he had come to Kolkata and had some means to build it.

I have lifted from these stories. I've stolen from these stories. But I've remade the characters so they don't directly relate to anyone's biography. The larger tragedy of the friend dying in the riot—that kind of loss—is made up and fictional.

I felt that I was uniquely positioned to write because of these two experiences of my father coming to Malaysia, and my mother's side of the family having that past. I was uniquely positioned to write this story about this journey from South to South-East Asia. Because it could be a whole library of books about experiences of the Indian diaspora in the West.

**Read the full interview on The Daily Star website.**

Usraat Fahmidah is a freelance journalist and writer. You can reach her on twitter @usraatfahmidah.

FEATURE

## Panihar Public Library: A heritage in ruins

A library containing more than 7702 periodicals, encyclopedias and books on literature, religion, poetry, science, and economics—all wasting away from neglect.

EMRAN MAHFUZ

The 72-year-old Panihar Public Library was established in the mid-1940s, arriving as a beacon for the people of Panihar, a remote village of Rajshahi's Godagari upazila, which had been formerly immersed in the darkness of illiteracy. It served the community for seven decades.

Disregard and neglect has now dimmed its light. The library, which was run under the Ministry of Education and Culture during the Pakistan period, has stopped receiving endowment. More than 7,500 books have been destroyed due to lack of renovation and preservation.

Apart from this, not many readers are seen in these libraries due to the lack of a proper reading environment; instead, one can easily spot termites moving across the space. Valuable books which are more than 100 years old are turning into ruins.

According to library sources, a philanthropist named Enayetullah Master built the library in a tin shed house on two acres of land next to his house. Today it stands without any touch of modernity. However, many poets, writers and researchers rush to access a lot of its rare books.

Daingpara intersection is situated in the Godagari upazila headquarter, which is about 35 kilometers away from Rajshahi city. Aihai village is 12 km away from here. Back in the days, this area, which lies within the arid Barendra region, was inhabited by



PHOTOS: EMRAN MAHFUZ; COLLAGE: ORCHID CHAKMA

indigenous groups. The road used to access the area was a long and wide one. One could access Panihar village after crossing the winding narrow road through Aihai village. This region is still known as a remote area within Rajshahi city dwellers. But Panihar is known not only in the country but is also recognised internationally due to its library.

Going there and seeing the library in front of my very own eyes made me tear up. An old newspaper file on the table was being consumed by termites; the wooden cupboards were falling apart; valuable books inside were in an unprotected state. Librarian Moazzem Hossain said that they are struggling to protect the priceless books. The walls of the library are hung with portraits of famous events and sages.

How was this library established in such a remote area? Veteran reader Rafiqul Alam said that the founder Enayetullah's father was a farmer but had a thirst for learning. As a result, he sent his son to Nawab Bahadur High School in Murshidabad, where he passed the entrance exam in the Bangla year of 1318. It was during this time that he became a member of the Nawab Bahadur High School library, which he used to visit frequently. When he returned to the village, he dreamed of establishing his own library.

Building on this aspiration, he first established a school in the Aihai village. The school started in 1938 with a monthly salary of 15 taka for teachers. He went from house to house to convince parents to let their children attend his school. Textbooks were brought from Calcutta—but the library did not exist as of yet. As the number of books increased, the Panihar Library was established in 1945.

Enayetullah reached out to the villagers to contribute to the library. He constructed the building in front of his house, using mud. At the same time, Sagaram Majhi—a classmate of Enayetullah's—was elected as the MLA from this area in the United Front elections. Majhi came forward to support Enayetullah's initiative. Soon, the library was bustling with readers.

**Read this article online on The Daily Star's website.**

Translated from Bangla by Hrishik Roy.  
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